



DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
DETROIT DISTRICT, CORPS OF ENGINEERS
BOX 1027
DETROIT, MICHIGAN 48231-1027

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IN REPLY REFER TO

Public Affairs Office

Dear Editor

Noah Webster defines balance as a “state of harmony, stability, etc.” Our Great Lakes ecosystem requires appropriate environmental stewardship and a *balanced* management approach, allowing human activity while preserving the resource for future generations. Call this balanced approach “Win/Win.” Many activities conducted on the Great Lakes unavoidably affect that balance and, as such, are subject to management activities that seek common solutions for the benefit of all citizens. Current Great Lakes low water levels have exposed bottomlands, prompting the reemergence and growth of coastal wetland vegetation. Controlling the growth of this vegetation represents a current Great Lakes management issue of some prominence. The ensuing debate over these coastal wetland alterations, like any other complex environmental issue, will require a balanced approach with an eye on sustainability.

Historically, Great Lakes water levels rise and fall in a natural and cyclical process. Our current low lake levels represent a part of this natural cycle and predictably follow the last such event that occurred in the 1960s. These water level changes result in a dynamic Great Lakes shoreline in which high and low water conditions create a variety of habitats, each supporting a diversity of fish and wildlife species. The State’s citizens, including countless sportsmen and women, enjoy the resultant bounty.

In other areas of the country, taxpayers are paying staggering sums to reverse damaging trends in water quality, erosion, and fish and wildlife habitat loss. Citizens desire clean water and opportunities to hunt, fish, and enjoy other recreational activities. The Great Lakes are no different—we have our own challenges and potential solutions. With the premier freshwater system in the world, our organizations are hard at work to make sure tomorrow’s Great Lakes user has the same diversity of fish and wildlife resources enjoyed today, while still preserving opportunities for public access and personal enjoyment. Realizing such a goal means recognizing that some natural processes are already serving us, at no charge. During previous low-water periods, the value of our coastal wetlands was not well understood. We now know better. Today’s environmental stewardship focuses on the common recognition that the more natural a system works, the less costly it will be to fix later. Any debate concerning the alteration of Great Lakes coastal wetlands must take note of this simple, but all-important principle.

At the suggestion of State Representative Joseph Rivet (D-Bay County), representatives from federal and state government agencies, property-owner groups, environmental groups, and elected officials formed The Shoreline Task Force. This group recently met over the course of three months to identify potential fact-based solutions for balancing desires to eliminate or control emergent vegetation with the public's interest in preserving natural coastal processes. The Task Force's "consensus document" (available at http://www.lre.usace.army.mil/index.cfm?.chn_id+1936) provides critical input to state and federal agencies responsible for Great Lakes management programs. The Task Force reaffirmed the many values of coastal wetlands and recommended that the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers streamline the permitting process and align state and federal regulatory guidelines.

Arguments for the unregulated alteration of coastal wetlands are as diverse as the resource itself. Many infuse their arguments with property rights; however, the issue is not one of ownership, but rather of stewardship. The MDEQ and Corps, with input from the public and agencies like the US Fish and Wildlife Service, are charged with an important stewardship role. Emotion should not dictate decision-making processes as our Great Lakes are too critical a resource for this kind of shortsighted approach. Water levels will rise and fall but our commitment to sustainable management practices should be unwavering. As such, we agree with the Task Force findings and are committed to seeking ways to become better, more efficient government agencies without minimizing or diminishing our stewardship role. Within the next couple of weeks, the MDEQ and the Corps will announce plans to help achieve the balance that Michigan's (and our nation's) citizens demand. These plans will reflect the need for human activity balanced with the absolute requirement for sustainable management policies and practices. Anything less is not "Win/Win" – it is "Lose/Lose."

Thomas H. Magness
Lieutenant Colonel, US Army
District Engineer
Detroit District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

Craig A. Czarnecki, Field Supervisor
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
East Lansing Field Office